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Democracy at Work

WHEN an Englishman talks of the right to vote he means electing his M.P. and his local Council every few years. The vote in Switzerland means much more. The Swiss people possess two great rights, the Initiative and the Referendum by which Parliament and the Government can be checked. Many times every year the citizen is called upon to decide matters of local, regional and national importance, that is in the Commune, the Canton and in the Confederation.

During the past few months the voter has been kept busy. It started on 4th November, when the federal plebiscite on the limiting of Parliament to 200 took place, which, as was reported at the time, was accepted. The Cantons and Communes took the opportunity to submit other matters to the popular vote. The town of Zurich had to consider as many as seven proposals, all of which the voters accepted, amongst them the subsidy to the municipal theatre, the erection of a subterranean car park on the Hardau estate and the building of a sports ground and open-air establishment at Seebach. In addition, four cantonal proposals were submitted, and accepted, amongst them the revision of the health laws (78,794 yes to 66,985 no), and two hospital improvement schemes (children's hospital and district hospital of Pfaeffikon).

In the Canton of Solothurn six other matters were submitted to the citizens at the same time as the federal proposal. They accepted the road and bridge building programme, refused the proposed prison building at Duerrbach (So) and agreed to that in Olten. In St. Gall five matters of importance had to be decided. The move of the agricultural exhibition (OLMA) halls to St. Jakob was accepted, as was the proposal to spend four million francs for electronic data computers for the municipal administration.

In the Canton of Berne 28 per cent of the citizens entitled to vote took part in the plebiscite on four matters, all of which were accepted, amongst them the decrees regarding mining and oil prospecting, and a change in the tax laws which will relieve the man with a modest income. And five weeks later the citizens of the town of Berne had to vote on six more propositions. Again a small percentage (only 16.8 per cent) took part. The budget was accepted including the present rate of taxation. Two supplementary credits for the enlargement of the secondary school at Buempliz and the swimming baths Weyermannhaus were granted, and the voters accepted the proposal to sell a piece of industrial land (value 1½ million francs) to the Confederation.

Zug elected its new Municipal President on 13th January in the person of Robert Wiesendanger. This was the second voting,

after the first election in November had not been successful owing to none of the three candidates receiving an absolute majority. This happened in other places, too, for instance in Basle, where the electorate had to choose two new Presidents of the Criminal Courts. None of the four candidates received an absolute majority on 27th January, so the elections were repeated on 10th February when the law of relative majority was put into operation. This time, again out of four candidates, Dr Walter Pfister (no party) and Dr Peter Dettwiler (Radical-Democrat) were successful.

The rate of taxes was reduced by the citizens in various Communes. Annual budgets had to be accepted by a small Commune like Tavannes, where 290 citizens voted, and a large town like Lucerne, where 3138 (to 822) voters accepted a 37 million budget.

Just how much power the citizen has is shown in the following example. The Commune of Koeniz rejected the budget for 1963 on 16th December because the authorities had taken no notice of a widespread wish to have the rate of taxes reduced. So the Commune Council submitted a new scheme which envisages a reduction. This budget was then accepted by the voters on 10th February.

Proposals for increased salaries and pensions and cost-of-living grants were put to the electorate in several places. Lucerne voted for considerable improvements in the pension scheme for its civil servants. Zurich and Grenchen approved an increase in old-age pensions. Thun agreed to an increase in a cost-of-living grant of 5 per cent to civil servants and teachers, after two proposals for a basic salary rise had been rejected in the summer.

The citizens of Igis-Landquart (Grisons) approved an increase of salary to the teaching staff and to the Commune President (from Fr.6000 to Fr.10,000). At the same time they refused to sanction the proposed revision of the Commune constitution. This unexpected result made the Commune Council consult a lawyer for his considered opinion.

Another Commune Council which was put into a spot on account of the voters' decision is that of Moutier. The citizens rejected a credit of Fr.535,000 for the re-building of the old secondary school into a town hall. The difficulty arose because expenses had already been incurred before the citizens had been consulted! But in a second plebiscite they accepted the proposals.

Children's allowances were voted for in the Cantons of Schaffhausen and Uri. In St. Gall an increased subsidy to the Municipal Theatre and Orchestra was granted by the voters. At Waedenswil (Zurich) they approved 6.5 million francs for a water purification scheme as well as alterations to the cemetery, but they refused a

proposal by the Commune Council to purchase land on the Au peninsula at Fr.80 per square metre.

On the other hand, the citizens of Neuhausen am Rheinfall generously gave a credit of Fr.349,000 for the purchase of the "Galgenbusk" in order to preserve this green area for the community. On 10th February, the voters of Bienne rejected the proposed purchase of shares (3.8 million francs) in the building Cite Marie.

In a small place like Utzenstorf the citizens even had to approve an exchange of land between the Commune and a farmer. At Lyss, on the same day, the voters approved the sale of 30,000 square metres (value 1.2 million francs) to the motor manufacturers, "Simca-Suisse," who intend to move their Swiss headquarters to Lyss.

Many Communes had to vote on building projects such as a fourteen storey skyscraper at Ittigen (Berne) and school buildings for as much as 3¼ million francs at Affoltern a/Albis. A majority of 2 to 1 agreed in Schaffhausen to an 8.14-million-franc project to enlarge the cantonal school. In Zurich the erection of a new youth hostel was agreed by 52,349 to 11,282 votes. In Winterthur the citizens approved by a very large majority the 2.2-million-franc project to build a protestant church in the district of Veltheim, and at Uster the voters accepted the proposed subsidy of Fr.200,000 to the new Roman Catholic church.

On 10th February, the citizens of the Canton of Berne accepted the new education laws for middle schools which provide new scholarships. The Canton of Valais approved the school reform laws which also cover compulsory domestic training for girls and the creation of special classes for mentally handicapped children. The Valaisans also said yes to the new penal law regulations to replace those from 1848. In the Grisons the new laws concerning the execution of political rights were submitted to the electorate and accepted. On 27th January the size of the Cantonal Council of Lucerne was agreed to be 170 by 12,857 to 361 voters.

In order to show the extent to which the citizens are consulted mention should be made of one of the proposals submitted to the voters of Herzogenbuchsee. Should a mortgage of Fr.100,000 be granted to a local artisan? The electorate decided not.

In Winterthur the purchase of fourteen trolleybuses (4.9 million francs) was accepted by the citizens. In Geneva the people had to vote on whether a State Councillor's office should be a full-time one. They decided that no other occupation was compatible with the office and so the Geneva Grand Council now has to work out proposals fixing the remuneration of its State Councillors. Thun decided to turn the Kursaal which belonged to the Commune into a limited company in which the Commune would possess a share majority. The Grisons Capital of Chur voted that shops should be allowed late opening on the two Thursdays before Christmas.

The percentage of voting varies. It has been as low as 17 per cent in one Commune in the Canton of Berne and as high as 80 per cent on the same day in the same Canton. The Federal plebiscite regarding the number of seats in the National Council was voted on by 34.55 per cent of the male citizens. But the responsibility remains with the citizen in any decision submitted to the people. And the great rights, the Initiative and the Referendum, are his to use. A recent example comes from a Commune in the Canton of Berne (Madiswil), where the citizens demanded a second polling on the erection of a school building which was accepted when submitted to the electorate. After definite plans had been worked out a supplementary credit was needed and so a third vote had to be taken. On 10th February, 69 per cent of the electorate rejected this, and now the authorities are faced with the task of altering the whole project and submitting it again.

The Referendum has been used in several matters in many parts of the country. In Basle the local Parliament had agreed to guarantee 25 million francs towards the erection of a new hall for the Swiss Industries Fair. The Referendum was taken, especially on the grounds that the project lacked car parking space, but the electorate then upheld the original decision. In Lugano the Referendum was taken against the proposed congress house. These plans, too, have now been accepted by the people. Incidentally, the building will cost next to nothing as the gains from the games of chance at the Kursaal will cover the expenditure.

The Referendum was also made use of in Zurich regarding the opening till 1 a.m. of ten dancing places. The proposal therefore had to be put to the citizens, who rejected it by some 44,000 to 40,000.

One of the fiercest battles raged in Uri about the grant of the water concessions to the projected power works Buerglen II of the electricity board at Altdorf. The Referendum was taken against the decision, but the voters of all the twenty Communes in the Canton accepted the proposals by 3658 to 1542 at a participation of 67 per cent of voters.

At Aire (Geneva) the Commune Council had given permission to a householder to have new window openings made in his building. The Referendum was taken against this and the citizens had to decide. Ninety-eight of a registered total of 110 voted and rejected permission in the Commune Assembly.

This brings me to another aspect of political life in Switzerland. Every citizen from twenty years onwards and of good repute has the right to attend the Commune Assembly. Matters of local importance are decided, such as the purchase of land, erection of school buildings (Fislisbach, Aargau, voted as much as 3.6 million francs for one), and the rate of taxes. At Sursee the people voted

against a publicly owned slaughter house. At Zurzach over 300 citizens demanded an extraordinary Assembly. After a 3½-hour debate the secret poll resulted in a new planning scheme which would prevent the erection of a cement factory to which a majority of citizens are opposed.

Sometimes the Commune Assembly cannot function because of the necessary numbers not being present. The Canton of Aargau has a high quorum of 50 per cent and in recent months several Commune Assemblies had to be disbanded; at Wettingen even twice last summer and again twice recently. On one occasion 1930 men had to be sent home as the numbers were 58 short. The Cantonal authorities are concerned about this and are now working out new proposals regarding the quorum. Possibly an "Inhabitants' Council" (Einwohnerrat), a kind of Commune Parliament, may be proposed as in the town of Lucerne. Kriens (Lucerne), which has 16,000 inhabitants, accepted such a Council of 24 in November, and Emmen (Lucerne) decided in January to introduce it (40 members).

In Zug, the last Commune Assembly took place on 21st December. It was introduced in 1874 and now at the beginning of 1963 it is replaced by an "Inhabitants' Council" of 40 members. This does not mean that the rights of the citizen are curtailed—he will always have the power to start an Initiative and to make use of the Referendum to object, in the Commune as well as Canton and the Confederation.

—THE SWISS OBSERVER

(Based mainly on news received from Agence Telegraphique Suisse.)

Obituaries

MARIE ANNA ELISABETH HOLDENER

Mrs Marie Anna Elisabeth Holdener died in Hawera Hospital on March 30th, aged 71. She came to New Zealand in 1914 and with her husband Frank, took up farming in Whenuakura and Manaia until they went home to Switzerland again in 1925. However, they could not forget New Zealand and returned in July, 1927, and settled permanently on a farm in Manawapou Rd., until their retirement to live at Princess Street, Hawera, eight years ago.

Mrs Holdener was a perfect mother and wife and was especially very fond of a well-kept flower garden. Her beloved flowers were always a treat to see and could almost whisper a kind word of welcome to visitors and admirers. The large amount of floral tributes on the occasion of her funeral in the Hawera cemetery was a striking testimony to the popularity of the deceased.

To the bereaved husband and daughters Mary (Mrs John Steiner, New Plymouth) and Hilda (Hawera) we extend our deepest sympathy.

—J.C.W.